

IB Business Management – Operations Management

5.6 Research and Development – Types of Innovation

PlumpyNut, a therapeutic food which is both durable and can be dispensed outside of traditional medical settings.

PROCESS INNOVATION

Innovations can also focus on processes through which products are created or delivered. Because so many of the products used in relief settings are initially developed for non-relief contexts, a natural focus for humanitarian innovation is to consider how an existing product might be used in resource-poor or rapidly changing settings. Examples of process innovations that have had a positive effect on the humanitarian sector are the increasing stockpiling of goods in strategic locations, or the use of pre-made packs and kits.

POSITIONING INNOVATION

The third focus of innovation involves re-positioning the perception of an established product or process in a specific context. Position-based innovations refer to changes in how a specific product or process is perceived symbolically and how they are used. For example, Levi-Strauss jeans are a well-established global product line, originally developed as manual workers' clothing materials, but then re-branded as a fashion item.

In the humanitarian context, position innovations include changes in the signals that are disseminated about a humanitarian organisation and its work. This may relate to the way in which aid is marketed and packaged for potential donors. Alternatively, it may involve a repositioning of humanitarian assistance within a particular operational context or for particular users. An example of the former can be seen in attempts by humanitarian agencies in different complex emergencies to develop principle based cross-agency positions in relation to belligerent parties in complex emergencies which amount to a set of conditions under which humanitarian aid would be delivered, and a clear articulation of the situations where it would not. Agencies such as Disability International or HelpAge International are position innovators in that they call for the delivery of humanitarian products and services to groups that are often excluded.

PARADIGM INNOVATION

The final 'P' relates to innovation that defines or redefines the dominant paradigms of an organisation or entire sector. Paradigm-based innovations relate to the mental models which shape what an organisation or business is about. Henry Ford provides a pithy quote, when talking about the development of the Model T motor car: 'If I asked people what they wanted, they would have asked for a five-legged horse'.

Examples of paradigm innovation in the international humanitarian sector include an increasing emphasis on local ownership and leadership of responses to crises as an alternative to internationally dominated responses. A greater and more central role for aid recipients is another example, and finally, perhaps the most radical innovation is the idea of disaster risk reduction approaches, which if successful can negate the need for any kind of response.

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The development of community-based feeding therapy is one of the most recent examples of such innovations, with the combination of a product (PlumpyNut), a process (community-based distribution), a re-positioning (the idea that aid agencies do not need to do the feeding themselves directly) and a paradigm shift (the notion that families and communities can treat malnutrition at home). Similarly, cash-based programming at its most radical involves a new product (cash), new processes (means of distributing cash), new position (a change in how aid is perceived by donors) and new paradigms (a change in how recipients are perceived by aid agencies).

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